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John N. Heyworth

Edith Cowan University, j.heyworth@ecu.edu.au

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Developing Social Skills Through Music: The Impact of General Classroom Music in a Lower Socio-Economic Area Primary (Elementary) School

John Heyworth

John Heyworth is a lecturer in primary generalist education, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia.

j.heyworth@ecu.edu.au

How often have we heard about large classes with “unruly and uncontrollable children” where teachers use “reward and punishment” approaches to control the classes with varying degrees of success (Bloom, Perlmutter, & Burrell, 1999, p.132)? In the past, many schools have attempted to adapt policies that set strict rules about unacceptable behavior, yet the problems often remain (Simonsen, Sugai, & Negron, 2008).

In more recent times, constructivist practitioners have offered a differing approach that recognizes classrooms and schools as “social places where social context and social activity influence children’s thoughts and actions” (Mallory & New, 1994, as cited in Bloom et al., 1999, p.132). Katz and Galbraith (2006) note that children who learn to interact with each other in a positive manner “will develop appropriate negotiating skills in times of conflict; have a sense of belonging and acceptance and establish attitudes, values, and skills essential for a satisfying life” (p. 5).

A recent report about creativity and well-being (McLellan, Galton, Steward, & Page, 2012) discusses significant research into the importance of well-being and how it will be a key factor in developing flexible, self-regulated, and resilient thinkers. Social-emotional development could well be the foundation to a child’s educational and lifelong future (Mindess, Chen, & Brenner, 2008). As Eisner (2003) states, “Through interaction we learn to use our minds” (p. 341).

Music is a social and interactive subject. It includes communal singing and various levels of group music making. School choirs, instrumental ensembles, and musical theater are all examples of

musical activities that draw groups and communities together. In the words of Pound and Harrison (2003), "Music has traditionally played a strong role in supporting group cohesion." Sawyer (2008) emphasises the collaborative nature of group music playing in her discussion on jazz music education: "Group musical improvisation is one of the purest examples of human collaboration" (p. 50).

Is just participating in musical activities enough? With the right approach, music can be a powerful medium to build self-esteem and a sense of belonging. However, the musical experience needs to be positive and enjoyable. In the words of Hallam (2010),

Engagement with music can enhance self-perceptions, but only if it provides positive learning experiences which are rewarding. This means that overall, the individual needs to experience success.

Success fosters motivation, and motivation leads to success (Hartley-Brewer, 2006). Both lead to a feeling of well-being. Wallin and Durr (2002) found that engagement with the arts in school had a positive influence on students' personal and social development. Hallam (2010) also notes that for the students themselves, "In music there were perceived effects relating to awareness of others, social skills, well-being and transfer effects." Music is for all, in that it should be welcoming, accepting, and inclusive (Mills, 1998).

In this study, I present an example of a pro-active constructivist approach to music education in the context of social learning. I describe the "journey" (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2009) in which I come to the conclusion that music is a powerful tool for social learning, particularly if used as an integral part of a whole school approach. In this approach, music helps foster students' value beliefs, sense of belonging and engagement, and behavioral self-management (Bloom et al., 1999). The following story has been designed to be engaging, informative, and accessible for the general educator, as well as the specialist (Sword, 2009).

Initiation of the Study

As a university lecturer in a pre-service teacher education program, I often have the opportunity to visit and work in partnership with local schools. One school was located in a lower socio-economic area and served a particularly large percentage of children from single parent homes, and of non-English-speaking and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (Department of Education, 2012). This school served many “at-risk” children, who display quite challenging attitudes and behaviors (school principal’s personal communication, November 2009). Ballantyne and Mills (2008, p.78) explain,

In Australia, the students historically “at risk” are those from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), rural and remote areas, low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, as well as students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

From my own observations and conversations I had with the principal, music teacher, and other classroom teachers, the school seemed to manage this mix of children very well. Of particular interest to me was the role that music played in fostering students’ “sense of belonging” within the school. I arranged to work with the music teacher for one morning a week to better understand this process, and have continued to do so for the last three years. The present study developed out of my engagement with the school over this extended period.

In early 2012, the school music teacher was discussing with me a particularly challenging class that she was teaching. I suggested conducting some action research together on the success, or otherwise, of using music to help these children develop a sense of belonging, become better able to self-manage behavior, and, as a result, become better learners within the school and classroom structures (Bloom et al., 1999). We decided to conduct the study over a 10-week period in 2012, using an action research approach.

Action Research

Through a continuing cycle of reflective practice, the teacher and I would “act, observe, and reflect” on our work with these children (Holly et al., 2009). My role, as the final reporter of this study, was to immerse myself in these lessons as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1986) and to try and make some meaning out of my involvement (Crotty, 1998). The approach to this study thus resembles the ethnographic action research approach described by Bath (2009), keeping within a defined timeframe. (See Blog Appendix 1 at <http://musicandsociallearning.blogspot.com.au/>.)

Data Collection

In a multi-faceted approach (Dicks, 2006), two main forms of data were collected: observations in the field and digital recordings in the field. Data were collected by observing, reflecting, and writing weekly diary comments. As the number of weeks progressed, additional data were collected in the form of artifacts and photographed classroom charts or posters that had been utilized, developed, and/or modified. In latter weeks, digital video recordings were also made.

For each lesson, I jotted down observation points across the main sections of each lesson—introduction, discussions, class singing, group work, class ensemble work, and class reflections. I used the following symbols to depict the students’ engagement: US (unsettled), S (settled), L (listening), P (playing), and C (collaborating). Later in the study, I added UR (unruly), as circumstances decreed. During analysis, I attached these observations to a numerical scale, in which “1” was “unruly” and “6” was “collaborative,” purely to give me a simple view of trends during the lessons.

I made photographic copies of the teacher’s weekly reflection notes in her daily work pad. Toward the end of the process, I gathered more data in the form of video recordings of whole-class and group-work activities. Finally, I made an audio recording of interviews with the music teacher and with the school principal.

Background of the School

The primary school was a modern school built on the same site as an education support center to serve a diverse student population in a lower socio-economic area. Two schools that had recently closed in the area had combined to form the population for this new school. As an Independent Public School designed to have the flexibility to meet the needs of its local community, the school managed its own budget and selected its own staff. As a modern school, its facilities were excellent and included modern classrooms, libraries, assembly area, art and music rooms, as well as community rooms for health and dental facilities. Overall, the school had “distinctive architectural design, vibrant use of colour, innovative building materials and creative artworks and landscaping.” The school was designed to be an establishment that inspired community pride (Department of Education, 2012).

The school population was significantly disadvantaged, falling well below the national average of schools. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012) is a national government body responsible for the development of the Australian Curriculum from Foundation to Year 12. An Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) was created by this Authority to categorize schools according to education advantage. The formula for ICSEA contains the following variables: $ICSEA = \text{Socio Economic Advantage (direct/indirect)} + \text{Remoteness} + \text{Percent Indigenous} + \text{Disadvantaged Language Backgrounds Other Than English}$. The average rating of a school was identified as 1,000. This particular school had a rating of 875 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012).

The children, from many diverse backgrounds, exhibited tiers of behavior, such as being withdrawn, showing poor socialization, or displaying poor attitudes to learning. These behaviors were some of the symptoms resulting from a wide variety of influences, including trauma, poverty, family dysfunction, and conflict or language difficulties. The school was coping on a daily basis with these issues from an understanding of its fragile and diverse population. The school’s approach built on the notion that “this is how a community works,” scaffolding a “Values: You Can Do It” program that emphasized consistent use of positive language in every part of school life. Phrases like “Persistence, Organization, Getting Along” or “Showing Confidence” were examples of such positive

language. Every teacher, and indeed every adult on the school premises, played a role in promoting this ideology. The approach was consistent, and so there were no surprises. In this way, all children coming into this school could find a community that would welcome them (principal's personal communication, November 2012).

Background of the Class

Within the school population, the children we studied belonged to a year 5 class (music teacher's personal communication, June 2012). Many of the children came from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB); for example, approximately 10% were of Vietnamese origin and a further 30% were of Indigenous origin (Department of Education, 2012). The 30 students were a near even mix of girls and boys. As children arrived, their homelands were added into the music room world map displayed on the wall.



Figure 1. Classroom Displays: MAP

Historically, the class had been a difficult one to manage. In the previous year, the class had to be split in an effort to manage their disruptive behavior.

This year the class was combined and is the best combination of individual personalities we could make by dividing the students into two groups – a straight Year 5 [the one studied here] and a Year 5/6. This is the continuation of the movement from last year.

(Music Teacher personal communication, June 2012)

We considered this to be a challenging case to study.

Classroom Environment

The music room was a supportive environment. The classroom environment reflected the whole school philosophy of value building and supporting students' resilience in their academic and social learning. This philosophy was reflected not only in posters, but also on charts where children could add in their own words and value concepts as they arose in the course of their daily school lives. Five value charts, adapted from the Western Australian Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998), conveyed the themes of "Respect Yourself," "Respect Others," "Respect the Environment," "Respect the Common Good," and "Be the Best You Can."

Point systems were used to reward class participation, cooperation, and enthusiasm. As the lesson progressed, the children added points, which were totalled and added onto a master chart. The charts were kept up-to-date and were visible to everyone. The class with the most points won a music merit award at assemblies, and were allowed a music game in the following lesson.

The number and type of posters that were displayed in the classroom provide further evidence that music education is an important process in developing students' sense of engagement and belonging, building their value beliefs and learning to self manage their behavior. The number of posters related to social learning was 20, outnumbering the 12 relating to music content and a further six for other learning areas.

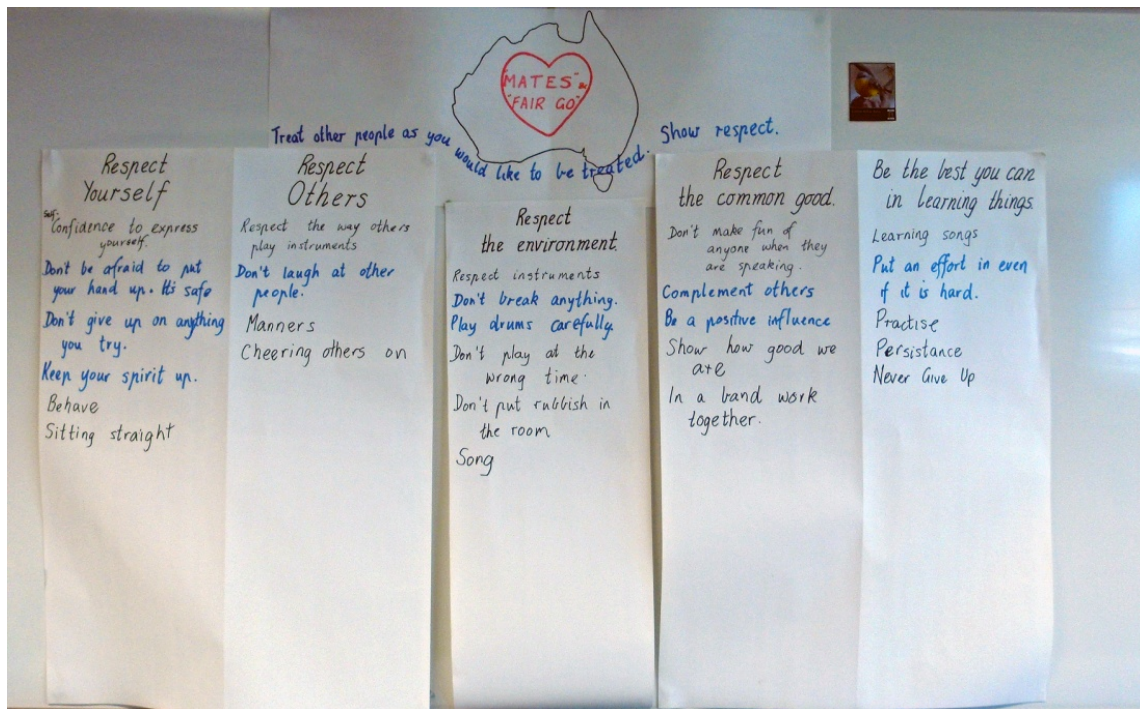


Figure 2. Classroom Displays: Value charts

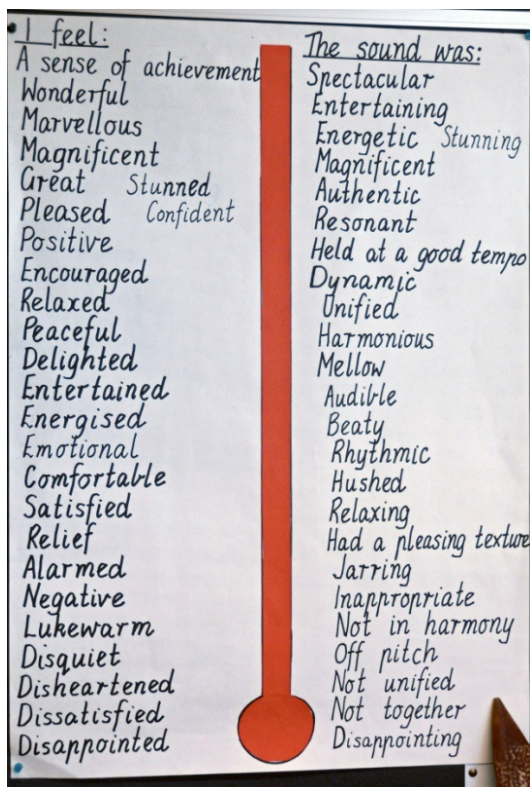


Figure 3. Emotional thermometer linked to musical concepts

The teacher's manner and directions were very clear, firm, and friendly. Children were mostly seated on the carpet; occasionally, one or two would have to be moved to another spot to help them keep their focus on the teacher and the lesson. Upon occurrences of particularly disruptive behavior, a red file could be sent with the child concerned to the front office. Finally, in rare situations when a child was not coping with learning in this environment, the school would provide a one-to-one support assistant who would accompany the child to each class.

In view of the whole school focus on values, the classroom set-up was very similar in implementation to the Small Group Intervention Model (SEAL), adapted from the Department for Education and Skills (UK), as described by Lendrum, Humphrey, Kalambouka, and Wigelsworth (2009). This whole school, small group, one-to-one approach was designed to help facilitate children's personal development in a safe environment where the children can take risks, learn more about themselves, relate to others and reflect upon their learning (Lendrum, et al., 2009, p.229).

Lesson Format

Each lesson was 45 minutes long and followed the following format: transitions, discussions, singing, group and class instrumental work, and class reflections. These elements form the major "episodes" in most week-to-week lessons. I decided to use Erikson's (Derry et al., 2010) approach of using these sections, or "episodes," in assisting the analysis of each lesson in video and also adapt this idea for my week-to-week observations. Therefore, the content or data would be categorized into the following: Transitions, Discussion, Singing, Ensemble (group and class), and Reflections.

Group Format

The instrumental groupings were formed largely according to the resources that were available. There were the standard tuned and un-tuned percussion instruments, a couple of guitars, some keyboards, and djembe drums. I worked with the guitar group. Within this group, there was even more scope for developing skills, while at the same time promoting reflection, cooperation, and

collaboration. It is interesting to note that as this program progressed, more and more guitars started to appear in the classroom, donated by parents of the school council. This was some small evidence of the positive impact guitars were having with young children.

Music Content

The music content mainly consisted of singing, playing, listening, creating, and responding. Weekly class singing involved some songs purely for singing enjoyment. My observations indicated, however, that most songs had an academic learning or social learning focus. For example, the importance of breakfast for healthy eating was a song written for the class by the music teacher. (See audio example at <http://musicandsociallearning.blogspot.com.au/>)

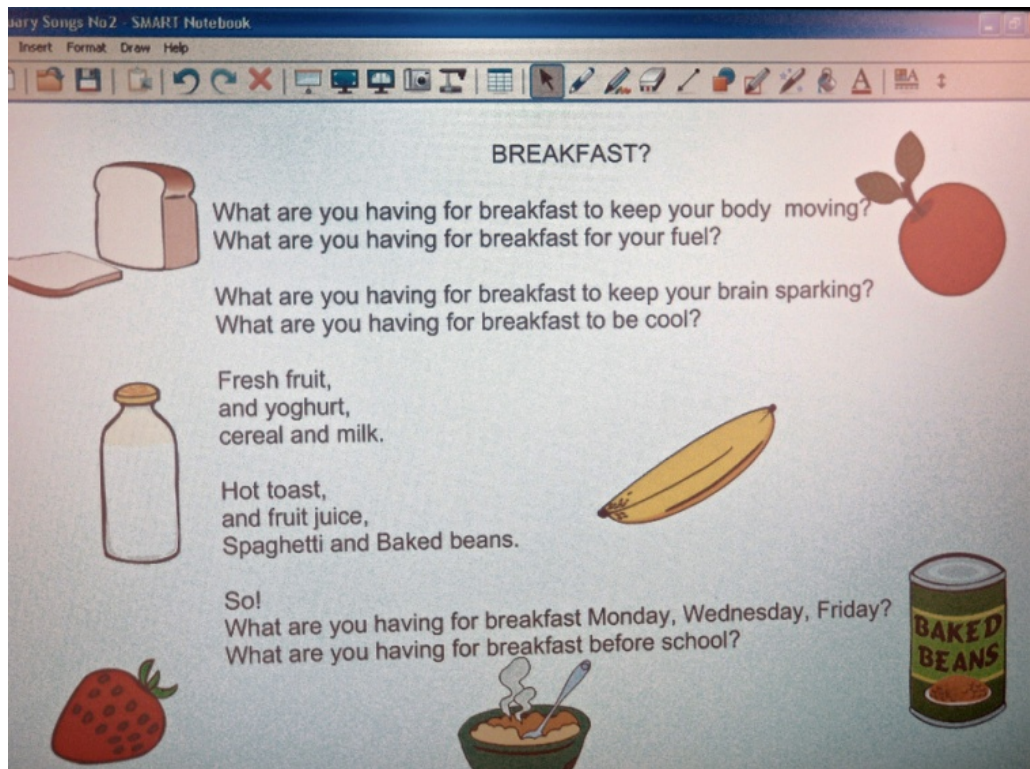


Figure 4. Breakfast Lyrics on Electronic board (Music teacher, 2012)

Within class discussions, students could add their own breakfast menu to the song. This varied depending on the child's cultural or ethnic background. This is a typical example of classroom discussions promoting values.

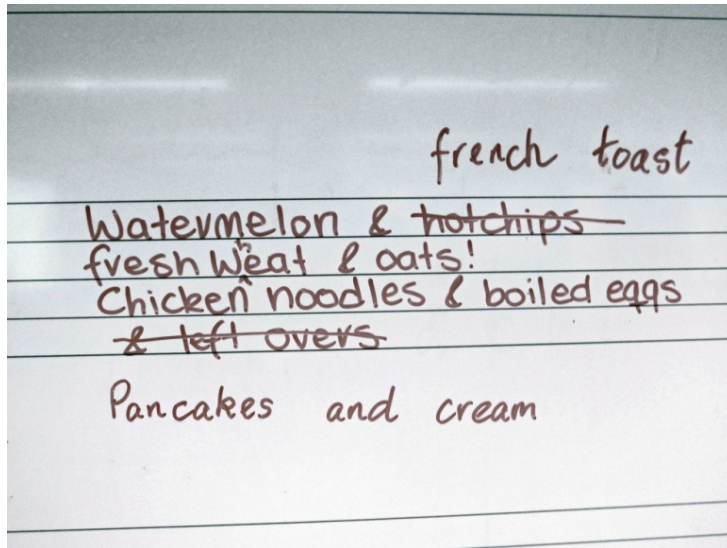


Figure 5. Children's contribution to the "Breakfast" song

"I Am Australian" (Woodley, B. & Newton, D., 1998), a well-known song, was another example of how the music program was not only inclusive of all children, but valued children from different cultures. Here, the teacher had a school community teacher aide translate the chorus into the area's traditional indigenous Nyoonga language (music teacher's personal communication, June 2012).

Instrumental Music

The instrumental music was adapted and arranged by the teacher from known songs that the children had sung. To be inclusive of all children, these parts were mostly very simple rhythm patterns or "ostinatos" that could be repeated throughout the song (Bowman, 2002). Simple ostinatos or loops like these still had the scope to be extended for the more skillful students within each group. For example, the rhythmic concept developed by the teacher for "Dip Dip and Swing" (YouTube, 2010) could be quickly learned as a whole class (Ti Taa Ti Taa Saa). This was enough for all children to be able to participate and play at a base level in their respective instrumental groupings. Those who could read music or had more patience were then extended beyond this within their groupings.

Dip, Dip and Swing

Trad

Voice

Dm

My pad - dle's keen and bright Flash - ing with sil - ver.

3

Fol - low the wild goose flight Dip dip and swing.

5

Dip, dip and swing her backFlash-ing with sil-ver.Swift as the wild goose flies. Dip, dip and swim.

Loops/Ostinatos

9 Untuned Percussion Tuned Percussion

11 Piano/Keyboard

12 Guitar

Dm

④ ⑤ ④

0 0 0 0

Figure 6. Musical Score

Classroom Data

The data collected provided me with insight regarding the trends of student engagement and students behavioral self-management. I could also clearly see how the teacher managed the class and how social learning was developed from week to week. (See Blog Appendix 2 at [http://musicandsociallearning.blogspot.com.au/.](http://musicandsociallearning.blogspot.com.au/))

Video Data

So how to analyze the two lesson videos? Through my observations, I had the notion that social learning is an important learning experience at all times in these music lessons even when music content appeared to be the focus. In these occasions, children were given the opportunity to reflect on the music and “how they felt” and/or “how things can be improved.” These thoughts and reflections were often shared across the class, usually from group to group. At other times, social learning and values were the focus, either through the material presented (e.g., healthy eating as in the “Breakfast” song), or through the needs of the class (when unsettled or unruly).

In a similar fashion to the adaption of Erikson’s approach I used for the lessons above (Derry et al., 2010), I initially broke the video into these episodes: Transitions, Discussion, Singing, Ensemble (group and class), and Reflections.

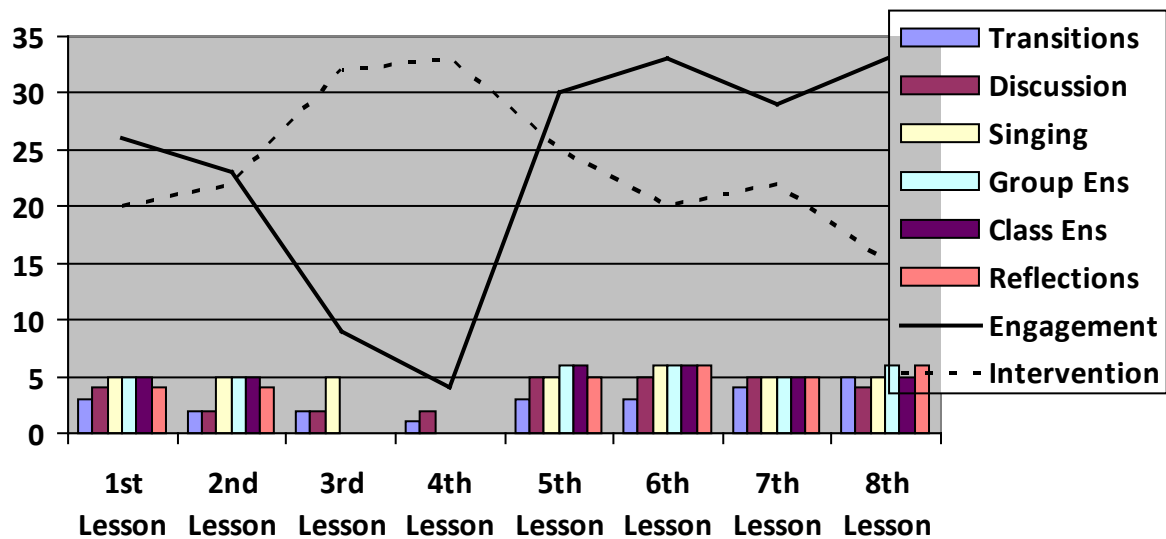
Within these episodes, I decided to look for the occurrence of social learning – either through dialogue or activities. My sub-episodes were M (Music focus only), MS (Music focus/Social learning), SM (Social learning focus/Music), S (Social learning only), O (Other). Within these, I looked for vb = value beliefs, eb = engagement and belonging, bs = behavior self-management, or 0 = no social learning.

I used Movie Maker (Microsoft, 2012) to break each video into sections; then, I “pasted” these sections together into their “episodes.” From here, I imported these mini clips along with the complete video into NVivo9 (QSR international, 2012). Here I found evidence of social learning aspects listed above. (See Blog Appendix 3 at [http://musicandsociallearning.blogspot.com.au/.](http://musicandsociallearning.blogspot.com.au/))

Data Overview

Table 1 gives a simple overview of the students' levels of engagement. This does not indicate the differing social learning approaches taken by the teacher according to the needs of her students.

Table 1 Summary of observation of students' levels of engagement in music



Teacher Interview

In our conversation, the teacher made the observation that during this music program the students' behavior and attitudes had improved "hugely" (music teacher's personal correspondence). In the course of the interview, I tried to ascertain how we could prove that conclusion. Just before the end of the interview, without any prompting from me, she produced the class list and discussed how each child had shown improvement over the course of the last few weeks. Ten of the more disruptive students had shown improvement, in that they had become more cooperative, less rude, and more engaged in the classroom. Two of these children recently joined a before-school music group, something the teacher said they would never had done in the past. One very difficult child, who constantly had to be given red files, had improved in attitude so much that he no longer received the red files and was actively engaged in musical activities. An autistic child was showing positive signs of becoming more involved in music. However, one child showed only marginal changes in attitude.

Two quiet children were now more confident in speaking up and giving more thoughtful responses in classroom reflection times. The more settled children were achieving more, because the class was more focussed and they were subjected to less negative comments from each other as well as from the teacher to the class as a whole.

The teacher believed that one of the main reasons for this success was the routine of rotating students through the groupings of instruments. This helped keep their interest, while teaching them to accept the team value of playing instruments in turn. Allowing turns was “part of the common good,” and was important to help the class learn to work as a team. She also felt that the guitar was a big motivation for them. I asked her if any teacher could include guitars into classroom music. She said that while tuning was an issue, she was able to include guitars in all her senior classes. She believed that if she could do it, so could anyone else!

Ultimately, the teacher felt that the students had become more “open” during this music study. If they were asked to do a job, they would do it; in general, they had shown overall “tremendous improvement” in their approach to learning in this music environment (music teacher’s personal correspondence, June 2012).

Discussion

It was interesting to see that the attitude the children brought into class had a significant impact on how smoothly the rest of the lesson would run. I observed that a consistent focus on values usually enabled lessons to proceed normally. I also noted that singing nearly always engaged the children, no matter how settled or unsettled they were.

I observed that, when needed, classroom values became the focus of the lesson, rather than the music. In lessons 3 and 4, their behavior self-management was poor, but did improve dramatically by lessons 5 and 6. It was notable that on all occasions when the class was achieving positive music outcomes, the teacher rarely missed an opportunity to make the children aware of their own positive feelings of well-being. This resulted in positive discussions and encouraged positive reflections made by the children themselves, providing us with evidence of engagement and belonging as well as an

acceptance of value beliefs. Such student comments as “I feel good,” “I feel happy,” “I feel in harmony when everything is in touch,” and “I feel relaxed peaceful and calm” were typical of the range of reflections made. When asked about playing musical instruments, some felt “nervous,” a few were “excited,” and others liked the fact that they were all “getting along.” While one child felt “dissatisfied,” the majority were very positive in their responses about participating in instrumental music. This encouragement for children to reflect upon and see the benefit of self managing their behavior appeared to be a significant factor in fostering good social learning outcomes.

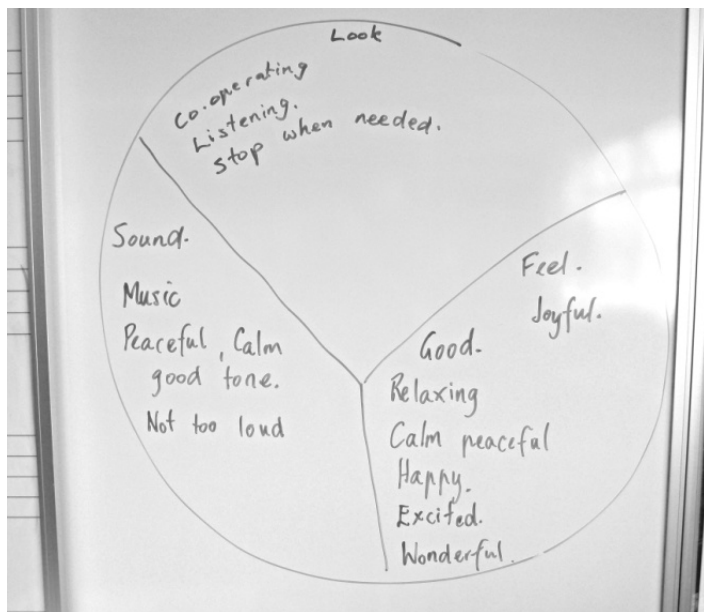


Figure 7. Y-Chart as part of class discussion on social learning outcomes

Depending on the needs of the classroom, music was used as the main focus of the lesson, with inclusivity, resilience, and well-being occurring as a result of the material being presented. At other times, particularly when classes were unsettled, social learning became the main focus of easily achievable music activities, such as singing or music games. In addition, classes performing at assemblies, or school groups going out and performing, were practical ways the children could see that “they could mix it with the best of them,” thus reinforcing the students’ sense of well-being and self-esteem (principal’s personal correspondence, November 2012). Although it can take time, their sense of belonging can go beyond school and into the wider community.

Conclusion

Music is a universal language; it is social in nature, and has the power to engage students from all backgrounds. Even in my own teaching experiences, I found music to be a subject NESB students could all relate to and participate in; the outcome being that they were able to succeed and feel a part of the whole school community. It is this powerful aspect of music-making that gives it potential to be a strategic tool for developing strong social values in any school setting, anywhere in the world. It is in this way that music plays an important role as part of a whole school approach to the social development of children.

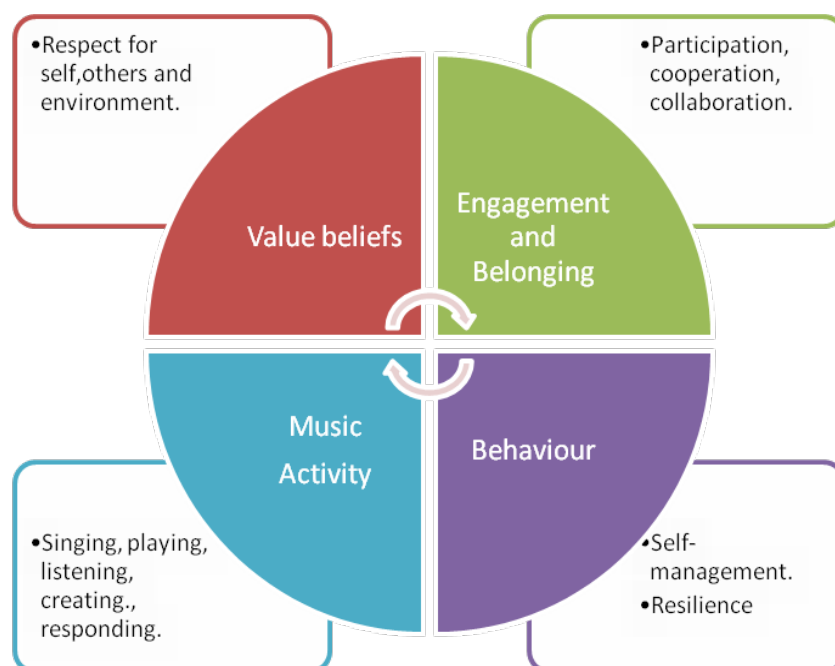


Figure 8. MUSIC Model Of Learning Encompassing Core Understandings of Life and Environment

The MUSIC MOLECULE described in Figure 8 is a metaphor that illustrates music as an important cog in the whole school approach supporting children's social, emotional, and educational development. The principal at the school described here expressed concern that some schools may miss the opportunity to use arts subjects, such as music, to positively build an inclusive culture within a school.

This is a very good place for the school to be in terms of engaging kids, in every assembly and in everything we do there is usually a musical element around it. If you look at the things that tie this school together, then you can see that music is really an important part of it.

Principal's personal correspondence, November 2012

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